

GRAPHICS TABLETS

INTRODUCTION

The mouse is a fantastic tool. Imagine trying to use your PC without one; you'd have to remember hundreds of keyboard short cuts, and even simple tasks such as moving from one web page to another would take ages. For some jobs, though, a mouse isn't appropriate. If you've ever tried to sign your name or draw a simple diagram with a mouse, you'll know how frustrating it can be.

The ideal tool for creative tasks such as editing photos or creating digital art is a graphics tablet. This lets you draw with a cordless pen that feels just like a pencil or paintbrush. Choosing a tablet can be tricky, though, as specifications alone can't tell you which are precise and comfortable to use.

This month we've tested almost every range of graphics tablet on the market. Whether you're a professional artist or an enthusiastic amateur, we'll help you find the perfect tool for your talents.

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Creating all manner of computer artwork is much easier with a dedicated graphics tablet. We look at six models to put you in the picture

KEEP TAKING THE TABLETS

Choosing a... Graphics Tablet

A graphics tablet should be well made, comfortable to use and accurate. A tablet's specifications will tell you very little about any of these factors, so read our reviews carefully to find out how well each one fared in use. There are other factors to consider as well, such as whether you need extra tools or controls, and whether you want any creative software to be included.

FINGER ON THE BUTTON

Every tablet here includes a special pen with a nib that allows you to draw and write as you would on a notepad or canvas. Many pens have extra features that you may find useful. Some have an eraser on the other end. This means you can quickly flip the pen around and remove 'ink' from the page you're working on.

Many have one or more buttons. These allow you to perform functions such as right-clicking or double-clicking. The Genius G-Note 7000 has no such buttons, so navigating through Windows and applications can be tricky without reaching for your mouse.

Several of the products in this group have extra buttons on the tablet. These can be assigned commonly used functions to speed up your work. We particularly liked the side-buttons and touch panels on Wacom's Intuos3 and Cintiq tablets.

THE SOFT OPTION

If you already have software for creating art or editing photos, you might only want a tablet to make it easier to use. If you're new to digital art, you'll need some software before you can get started. Several tablets in this group include software in the box.

If you want to paint digitally, Corel's Painter is a powerful tool for serious artists. Wacom's Intuos3 and Cintiq tablets include a limited edition of this software. If you want to have fun with paint, the ArtRage software included with Wacom's Volito2 tablet is great.

For editing photos, the Genius G-Note 7000 includes Ulead's PhotolImpact XL. This is handy, but it's not a patch on the Photoshop Elements 3 software included with Wacom's Graphire4 Studio A6.

SPECIAL FEATURES

Two of the tablets in this group have unusual features that you might find useful. The Wacom Cintiq has a built-in monitor, so you can draw directly on the screen and see marks appear under your pen. This is a superbly natural way of working, but at over £2,000 you'll need deep pockets.

More affordably, the Genius G-Note 7000 can be used as a mobile notepad, so you can scribble notes in a meeting and copy them to your computer afterwards. ➔



GENIUS G-Pen 450

★★★★

£35 inc VAT

Genius's G-Pen 450 has an active area roughly the same size as that of the Wacom Volito2 and Graphire4 Studio. The tablet itself looks quite smart, with a metallic silver finish and an abstract image covering the active area, but the pen looks and feels rather like a cheap ballpoint. The active area of the tablet is covered with a translucent plastic flap, so you can insert a photo or picture to trace.

Unlike the Wacom tablets, which need no batteries, the G-Pen contains a single AAA battery in the barrel of the pen. The metal clip that holds this battery looks surprisingly fragile, but you shouldn't have to open up the pen too often.

Installing the G-Pen proved to be extremely frustrating. We installed the drivers from the provided CD, rebooted our PC when requested and plugged in the tablet. Everything looked OK, with the tablet's light flashing and Windows detecting it correctly as a graphics tablet, but the pen wouldn't work. We changed the pen's battery, but it made no difference. Eventually, we found that unplugging the tablet and plugging it back in a few times did the trick.

This is a shame, because once installed the tablet worked well. Like Wacom's Volito2, we found that its pressure sensitivity wasn't perfect, so drawing a line that slowly passes from thick to thin is a little trickier than when using the more expensive tablets. It worked well enough for us to complete our photo retouching, though, and the two buttons on the pen can be set to sensible options such as one for right-clicking and one for double-clicking. The software also allows you to select areas around the edge of the pad that function as quick-launch buttons.

Trial versions of Adobe's Photoshop CS and Corel Painter IX are included, but we would have preferred a full version of a simpler graphics program for home use. The PenSuite software is handy, though, and allows you to scribble easily on Word documents or highlight areas of text with the pen.

The G-Pen works well enough, but if you're on a tight budget, the Volito2 is better.

SUMMARY

- ✓ Very low cost
- ✗ Fiddly installation; trial software
- ✗ Pressure sensor not perfect

GRAPHICS TABLET 140x100mm active area, 1,024 levels of pressure sensitivity, uses 1x AAA battery
SUPPLIER www.cclonline.com
DETAILS www.geniusnet.com.tw



WACOM Volito2

★★★★★

£40 inc VAT



The Volito2 is Wacom's cheapest graphics tablet, but it shares several features with its more expensive siblings. Like the other Wacom tablets in this group, it was extremely easy to install. It's also the cheapest tablet here that doesn't require any batteries. It is a dark, metallic grey colour, with a carbon fibre-like finish to the active tablet area and a shiny reflective effect around it. It wouldn't look out of place in a posh office.

Considering its price, the Volito2 is impressive. The pen has no eraser, but is otherwise very similar to the one included with the more expensive Graphire4 tablet. The tablet itself has no buttons or controls, but we didn't find this a huge disadvantage. We found that we could access most of the functions we needed for image editing with one hand on the pen and the other on the keyboard.

The smaller active area makes it difficult to create large, expressive brush strokes on a large canvas. However, the limited size isn't a problem when retouching photographs as you can zoom in to fill the screen – and so the tablet – with the area you're working on.

Our standard photo-manipulation test was almost as easy as when using more expensive tablets. The pen wasn't as sensitive to pressure differences, making delicate brushstrokes a little tricky, but we managed to airbrush a car from our test photo without great difficulty.

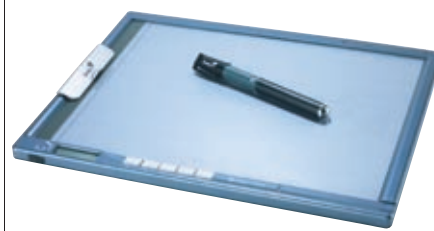
The only software included is a special edition of a painting program called ArtRage. This allows you to mess about with oil paints, crayons and other materials to create a realistic-looking canvas. It isn't a rival for serious paint packages such as Corel Painter, but it is fantastic fun and has a very simple interface that fills the entire screen. It's an ideal way to let kids run riot with paint, without ruining their clothes or your carpet. No special office software is included, but you can use the Volito2 to sign documents using Word's built-in drawing tools.

The Volito2 is excellent value. If you want extra control over drawing or photo-editing software that you already own, it's a great buy.

SUMMARY

- ✓ Cheapest tablet with no batteries
- ✓ Great art software included
- ✗ Pressure sensor not great

GRAPHICS TABLET 128x93mm active area, 512 levels of pressure sensitivity, no batteries required
SUPPLIER www.microwarehouse.co.uk
DETAILS www.wacom.com



GENIUS G-Note 7000

★★★★

£99 inc VAT

Genius's G-Note 7000 tablet has an A4-sized active area. This is impressive as no other tablet costing less than £300 gives you as much room. It also includes some clever note-taking features.

Installing the G-Note is a frustrating task. We followed the instructions only to find that it didn't work, and it took us several reboots and a lot of unplugging USB leads before it sprang into life. If you buy one, expect to take a little time to get it working. Its recessed USB connector is also a pain, and we found ourselves constantly having to reconnect the cable when it worked loose.

The G-Note takes five batteries: one in its pen, and four in the tablet. With batteries inside, the tablet can store notes when you're away from your computer. We were sceptical about this, but we found that it actually works very well; you can scribble notes using the special pen, and a set of buttons with an LCD lets you store multiple pages.

Once back at your PC, a software utility lets you download and view these notes. The software isn't great, but after reading the manual we could successfully write, copy and save our meeting notes. The tablet has 32MB of internal memory, and you can add an SD card if you need more.

Unfortunately, the G-Note 7000 is less impressive as a graphics tablet. Its size is great, but with no buttons on the pen our photo retouching took a long time. The G-Note can't detect different levels of pressure, either. You can't press harder to get a thicker stroke in a drawing or painting application, which means much less artistic control.

The box contains a decent bundle of software. The main graphics package, a cut-down version of Ulead's PhotoImpact XL, isn't as good as Adobe's Photoshop Elements, but it allows you to get started with photo editing.

The G-Note is a mixed bag. If you want to edit photographs or create art, any other tablet in this test would be better. If you want to make notes and transfer them to your computer for safe storage, though, it's a good way to do so.

SUMMARY

- ✓ Useful digital note-taking tool
- ✓ Large tablet for under £100
- ✗ Not good for art or photo-editing

GRAPHICS TABLET 279x216mm active area, on/off pressure sensitivity, note-taking facility, uses 5x AAA batteries
SUPPLIER www.cclonline.com
DETAILS www.geniusnet.com.tw



WACOM Graphire4 Studio A6

★★★★

£107 inc VAT

Wacom's Graphire4 tablets are available in a number of different sizes and packages with or without software. We reviewed the relatively inexpensive Studio A6, which comes with a bundle of software, but our ease-of-use observations apply equally to other Graphire4 models.

The tablet has a shiny silver cover, and its entire surface has a transparent plastic lid. This lid can be removed, allowing you to place a photo or picture behind it and trace the image. The tablet has two customisable buttons and a scroll wheel along its top edge. This wheel is useful, but it's in an awkward position. If the controls were on the edge of the tablet, they would be easier to operate while drawing.

The Graphire4 is the least expensive tablet here with an eraser on its pen. It's not quite as good as the pen included with the Intuos tablet, and its two buttons are noticeably less comfortable to use than the Intuos's single strip button, but it's still easy enough to use for long periods of time. When not in use it clips neatly into the top of the tablet cover.

We finished our test photo-editing session easily using the Graphire4. Its size makes it a little trickier to use than the huge Intuos A4, but with the screen zoomed in on the editing area we found it easy to airbrush away a car carefully and restore the buildings behind it in our photo. The pressure sensitivity is good, and not noticeably inferior to the more expensive Intuos tablet.

Unlike the cheaper tablets, the Graphire4 studio includes a useful software bundle. This comprises Nik Color Efex, which allows you to add filter effects to digital photographs, and Adobe's excellent Photoshop Elements 3. This isn't the latest version, but it's still an excellent tool for editing photos.

A copy of Photoshop Elements 4 costs around £60 including VAT, so if you need image-editing software as well as a tablet, this is a great bundle. Otherwise, we'd recommend the similarly sized Wacom Volito2, which is less than half the price.

SUMMARY

- ✓ Great value if you need software
- ✗ Active area no bigger than cheaper tablets
- ✗ Controls on tablet poorly placed

GRAPHICS TABLET 128x93mm, 512 levels of pressure sensitivity, no batteries required
SUPPLIER www.mycomputerbits.com
DETAILS www.wacom.com



WACOM Intuos3 A4

★★★★★

£335 inc VAT



Apart from the exotic Cintiq 21UX, Wacom's Intuos3 is the most expensive tablet in this group. Several sizes are available, and we tested one of the larger models that would be suitable for a serious amateur or professional artist. Other Intuos3s differ in size and price, but not performance.

The Intuos3 is as easy to install as any other Wacom tablet here, and is finished in a smart blue-grey colour. This A4-sized model includes a pen and a five-button wheel mouse, and a number of other more specialist tools are available as optional extras should you need them.

A small button pad on each side of the tablet's surface provides you with quick access to five buttons as well as a scroll pad. This long, rectangular area works in the same way as a notebook touch pad, and is ideal for zooming in and out of the image as you work on it. The two side pads are the same, so both left- and right-handed artists will be able to work comfortably.

The Intuos3's pen is comfortable, with an eraser and a long switch that can be rocked two ways. This is ideal to use for right-click and double-click functions. The mouse has four buttons and a clickable scroll wheel. When using the mouse, the pad switches into a mouse mode, allowing you to move your hand as you would with a normal desktop mouse.

Editing our test photo with the Intuos3 was easy and quick. The extra-large active area is ideal for those who work with a high-resolution display. The large surface area is of particular benefit when painting. A copy of Corel Painter Essentials 2 is included to get you started.

The Intuos3 is certainly a desirable tablet, but its price will be enough to put off most buyers. If editing or creating photos or art is your job and you'll be using a tablet for long periods of time, the extra size and fantastic tools make this a good buy. If you want a tablet for hobby or occasional use, you'd be better off with the substantially cheaper Wacom Graphire4 or Volito2 tablets.

SUMMARY

- ✓ Superb pen and controls
- ✓ Big surface makes drawing easy
- ✗ Expensive

GRAPHICS TABLET 305x231mm active area, 1,024 levels of pressure sensitivity, no batteries required
SUPPLIER www.mycomputerbits.com
DETAILS www.wacom.com



WACOM Cintiq 21UX

★★★★

£2,095 inc VAT

Although drawing on a tablet is significantly more natural than using a mouse, it still takes a little skill to draw accurately while checking your progress on a separate screen. If you can afford it, Wacom's Cintiq 21UX is a clever solution: a monitor that you can draw on.

The Cintiq 21UX is completely compatible with tools designed for Wacom's Intuos3 system, and the same excellent pen is also included. The active area covers the entire surface of its 21.3" LCD screen, so it's well over twice the size of the already large Intuos3 A4.

The tablet is connected to one thick cable, so you can rest it on your lap if you wish, but a stand is included. This allows you to adjust the screen quickly between almost flat and 60° of elevation.

The Cintiq's screen has a resolution of 1,600x1,200 pixels, giving you plenty of room for a large canvas or dozens of Photoshop tool palettes. It connects to a DVI or VGA video output, and will work as a normal monitor while you install the tablet driver, which works over a separate USB lead.

Before using the Cintiq you must calibrate it to match the screen to the tablet surface. It's best to do this with the screen at the angle at which you wish to work. We found using a very shallow angle was most comfortable, but this makes the surface very slightly inaccurate at the very bottom of the screen. After a few minutes we'd learned to compensate for this, and the effect is lessened if you set the display at a steeper angle.

Like the Intuos3, the Cintiq has buttons and a scroll pad on each side of the screen. We found these very useful when using Adobe Photoshop. A copy of Corel Painter Essentials 2 is included.

The Cintiq is a joy to use, and was by far the easiest tablet to work on when completing our photo-retouching test. Its price is very steep, though: a 21" LaCie LCD will set you back around £1,100 including VAT, and a huge A3 Wide Intuos3 tablet £600, so you pay a few hundred pounds for the convenience of this two-in-one product.

SUMMARY

- ✓ The easiest tablet to work with
- ✗ Slight accuracy problems
- ✗ Costs more than a separate tablet and monitor

GRAPHICS TABLET 432x324mm active area, 1,024 levels of pressure sensitivity, 1,600x1,200 pixel LCD, no batteries required
SUPPLIER www.mycomputerbits.com
DETAILS www.wacom.com

GRAPHICS TABLETS

					MOST WANTED	BEST BUY
MANUFACTURER	GENIUS	GENIUS	WACOM	WACOM	WACOM	WACOM
Model	G-Note 7000	G-Pen 450	Cintiq 21UX	Graphire4 Studio A6	Intuos3 A4	Volito2
Rating	★★★	★★★	★★★	★★★	★★★★	★★★★★
SPECIFICATIONS						
Active area	279x216mm	140x100mm	432x324mm	128x93mm	305x231mm	128x93mm
Pressure sensitivity	On or off only	1,024 levels	1,024 levels	512 levels	1,024 levels	512 levels
Resolution	1,000dpi	2,000dpi	5,080dpi	2,000dpi	5,080dpi	1,016dpi
Pen accuracy	Not disclosed	0.25mm	0.5mm, 1mm at corners	0.5mm	0.25mm	0.5mm
Pen tilt sensitive	No	No	+/- 60°	No	+/- 60°	No
Maximum pen-detection height	13.5mm	Not disclosed	5mm	5mm	6mm	2mm
Other	SD card slot, mobile note-taking features	None	21.3" 1,600x1,200 LCD	None	None	None
PHYSICAL						
Tablet size	255x325x20mm	230x217x23mm	535x415x59mm	208x204x18mm	440x340x14mm	201x205x13mm
Tablet buttons	5 buttons control note-taking facility	'Hot Cell' quick-launch areas on tablet	8	2	8	None
Other tablet controls	None	None	2 touch strips	Scroll wheel	2 touch strips	None
Pen tips	Pen	Pen	Pen, eraser	Pen, eraser	Pen, eraser	Pen
Pen buttons	None	2	2	2	2	2
Other tools included	None	None	None	None	Five-button wheel mouse	None
Other tools available	None	None	Airbrush, art marker, classic pen, ink pen, lens cursor	None	Airbrush, art marker, classic pen, ink pen, lens cursor	None
Other tablet sizes available	None	None	None	Studio XL A5 (£170)	A3 wide (£548), A4 oversize (£409), A5 wide (£275), A5 (£217), A6 (£185)	None
Batteries required	1x AAA (pen), 4x AAA (tablet, for note-taking only)	1x AAA (pen)	None	None	None	None
SOFTWARE						
Included software (full)	Ulead PhotoImpact XL SE, G-Note editor, Freenotes, OfficeInk	PenSuite	Corel Painter Essentials 2	Adobe Photoshop Elements 3, Nik Color Efex Pro 2 Standard	Corel Painter Essentials 2	ArtRage Wacom Edition
Included software (trial)	None	Corel Painter IX, Adobe Photoshop CS	None	None	None	None
REQUIREMENTS						
Interface	USB	USB	USB + VGA/DVI	USB	USB	USB
Operating system	Windows 2000/XP	Windows 98 SE/Me/2000/XP, Mac OS 9.x, 10.2.6 or above (driver only)	Windows 98 SE/Me/2000/XP, Mac OS 10.2.6 or above	Windows 98 SE/Me/2000/XP, Mac OS 10.2.8 or above	Windows 98 SE/Me/2000/XP, Mac OS 10.2.6 or above	Windows 98 SE/Me/2000/XP
BUYING INFORMATION						
Price including VAT	£99	£35	£2,095	£107	£335	£40
Supplier	www.cclonline.com	www.cclonline.com	www.mycomputerbits.co.uk	www.mycomputerbits.co.uk	www.jigsaw24.com	www.microwarehouse.co.uk
Details	www.geniusnet.com.tw	www.geniusnet.com.tw	www.wacom.com	www.wacom.com	www.wacom.com	www.wacom.com
Part code	31100011200	31100024100	DTZ2100	CTE-440/S-ST	PTZ930G	CTF-420/G0-B

Labs verdict Graphics tablets

However much you have to spend, there's a great graphics tablet in this test for you. The Cintiq 21UX is a joy to use, but its price of over £2,000 is enough to make almost anyone back away.

The brilliant Intuos3 A4 is a large tablet that's ideal for serious artists, and it costs less than £350. It's the best choice for professional users, and it wins our Most Wanted award.

Unless you edit pictures every day, though, you're likely to want to spend far

less than this. If you don't already have image-editing software, we recommend the Wacom Graphire4 Studio A6. It includes a copy of Adobe Photoshop Elements, giving you everything you need to start cleaning up your digital photos.

If you don't need software, Wacom's Volito2 is the tablet to pick. It's incredibly cheap but well made, and its sensitivity is only slightly worse than that of far more expensive products. It's great value, and it wins our Best Buy award.

WACOM
Volito2
★★★★★

WACOM
Intuos3 A4
★★★★★